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REVEALED FROM THE UNKNOWN

. . . OR . . .

THE METEORIC LAOCOÖN

BY

Ezra Cornell Monroe

AUTHOR OF

"Charge of Murat at Eylau"

"The Vaudois of the Vaal, or, How Cronje Stood at Bay"

"The Race in the Pantry, or, How Butterine Won"

"The Heroic Goat," Etc.

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...OR...

THE METEORIC LAOCOÖN.

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I am old now, yes, quite old. The stone that marks three score and ten, on life's eventful road, seems dim, so distant is it in the past; and the greatest mystery of all that is most mysterious, I soon shall solve. Yet I feel no lingering dread, for I have an abiding faith, that some might call belief, that but a temporal sway is wielded by that monarch of all terrors, Death.

It was not always thus with me, and so I pen this tale. It is not a fable, but the one great lesson of my otherwise most uneventful life. I believe that every life contains a story that should be given to the world. And so I prepare for my task of love and duty, love of truth, for it is immortal, and duty to my fellow man, while yet the fire light is brightly shedding its fitful gleam on a silhouette, a pyrographic panel, and on a meteoric group; all gathered beneath the menace of an ancient and rusted axe. These relics have grown aged in my keeping, and at my death I wish them buried at my side above two green and lowly mounds, that mark without the aid of chiseled stone, the burial of the dead.

* * * * * * * *

It was my first evening at the "Ridge". It was so called on account of the many hills that gradually and often most precipitously receded to the level of the distant plain, where lay a peaceful little village.

A roomy and spacious old mansion, was the "Ridge House"; and romantic, indeed, with its surroundings of rustic and uncultivated lawns and hedges. Within, it was antique in every par-

ticular. I was as yet scarcely thirty, but strong and robust and possessed of a freedom of thought, that laughed at superstition and rejected creeds. Many a weird and ghostly tale concerning the old grange the people of the neighboring village had poured into my ear since I had assumed my legal right, that of being sole heir of "Ridge Wood". "Ridge Wood Mystery", the village people now termed it, since the sudden and most unaccountable disappearance of its former occupant and owner, my aunt and her constant adviser and evil-faced partner in guilt, Sir Julius Craven. He was irreverently, but not without cause, spoken of by the neighboring vilagers, as "Jezabel's Craven".

Miss Jezabel Sternhold was my father's sister and had been my only living relative. She had always lived a maiden lady, and bore our family name. It was but a few months previous, that both she and her adviser, Sir Julius Craven, had so suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. That incident dated, as near as could be ascertained, from the line storm of that year, a temptest of peculiar and never to be forgotten violence. To say the least, I was as much puzzled and perplexed as anyone, while in my heart, there dwelt a nameless unspoken dread of that incident, which as yet had defiel all solution. Many detectives from the great cities had abandoned the case without even the slightest clue, supposition, or even tenable theory.

The former two occupants, Sir Julius Craven and Miss Jezabel Sternhold, and her supposed *wealth*, had disappeared as suddenly and effectually, as though the earth had opened and swallowed them up, or as if, like the elements at war, they had been spirited away amidst that storm, like fabled witches of old. My aunt, Miss Jezabel, was but little past middle life, and was said to have been as attractive in face and form, as she had been repellant in manner, ungracious in word, and regardless in deed. By extortion, had she become reputedly rich; money had been her God, and she had worshiped it, almost with the homage of idolatry. Her silhouette, fair as dark; hung in her gloomy chamber, and on its features I would often gaze in admiration. I had never seen my aunt, but I had often heard my father bitterly reproach her name, she having ruined him, and so caused my mother's death. I cannot recollect her, but my father, I well remember. He was proud of spirit and ambitious by nature. Grieving, he soon followed her to that land where I believe the just are rewarded, "The wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest". I was thus left an orphaned and penniless child, but not without kind and loving friends who cared for me, until my age enabled me to provide for myself.

Years had rolled by, and now after months of diligent and unceasing search, I had been found, had established my identity, and taken possession of my aunt's estate, as her only living heir. Months had passed since my arrival at the ridge. It was now the anniversary of that awful storm, which had swept that section of the country the previous Spring. My day's work was done, and I was comfortably seated in the room, that had formerly been my aunt's chamber, but which I had now converted into a library or smoking room. My aunt's silhouette yet hung in its accustomed place upon the wall. All else had been removed. It possessed for me a strange fascination. Its calm and classic features turned towards the open window through which the rays of the setting sun now shown with ebbing splendor, inspired me ever with its grace and beauty. Round it a purple vapor seemed to cling in space, and siren music to fill the fragrant air.

I gazed from its soft and most beautiful outlines, dreamily through the opened window that led to the veranda and thence across the shrub-dotted, velvety lawn to the trunk of an enormous oak that, buried almost to its shattered top, still stood in stern defiance of elements and time, emerging from its grave, like the soul of a mighty monarch. It had at no distant date surmounted a bank some thirty feet above, but the work of wind and rain had undermined it, and a thunderbolt had no doubt precipitated it to its present condition, its mighty roots like the arms of an enormous octopus dragging down tons of earth upon its fall. It was evidently hollow at its base, for where its top and limbs had broken off, there showed unmistakable signs of a large and spacious cavity beneath. Its former appearance must have been grand, stately and imposing indeed, as it surmounted the once perpendicular bank many feet above. Its shelter had been easily reached, however, by a path that then ran from the veranda.

Something of the detective is in us all, and necessity and circumstance alike develope it. I fancied my aunt had often visited its grateful shade, and wondered if her thoughts had ever romanced beneath its shady boughs. Perhaps, Julius Craven had sought her there and wooed in vain. There seemed to be a strange affinity existing between this monarch falling to decay and the haughty pride, the blossomed prime, depicted by the shadowed likeness on the wall.

A sudden gust of wind aroused me from my meditation. A storm was rapidly gathering in the west. I glanced back from the window, to the silhouette. It swung fanned by the rising breeze. It faced the open window and the buried oak. As the lightning flashed from cloud to cloud, I fancied its expression changed as though endowed with life. A strange, unspeakable dread suddenly assailed me. The

storm was now upon us. I hastened to close and make fast the window. The wind shrieked and wailed like a lost soul; the rain fell in large plashing drops; the thunder muttered omineously, and the distant forest sighed and moaned. An appalling darkness suddenly fell, for an inky cloud hung threateningly above the lawn. A sudden, mighty blast of wind and rain forced open and drove back the window doors within my very grasp. The gust rattled and shook the silhouette against the wall. The picture gave three distinct taps, as it swung vibrating upon its cord and settled to repose. The storm cloud glimmered as if in answer. I shall never forget that moment.

Suddenly, a blaze of light, illumined the storm cloud's awful gloom. Then a sheet of flame like a human arm and hand, long, bony and sinewy, darted from the bosom of its stygian darkness. The lurid gleaming hand, unfolded from itself a spectral axe, with its fiery blade raised as in covetous wrath. I heard the distant shriek of a woman's voice. Then the flashing blade of the phantom axe, parted from its shimmering helve and downward it smote the buried oak. I heard the lightning's sharp, distinct click, it was followed immediately by a deafening crash, then everything grew black and I realized no more.

When I recovered consciousness, the storm had passed; and countless stars shone in upon me with their cold and trembling light. I slowly raised myself and looked around. As I did so, something that had been lying upon my prostrated form clattered to the floor. I reached forth my hand and touched the thing; it was the silhouette; its cord had broken. I was cold and damp, an overpowering dread suddenly took possession of me. With a hoarse cry, I hastily withdrew my hand, and staggered to my feet. In an instant I remembered all. Cold drops of rain and sweat stood upon my trembling frame. In a paroxysm of weakness, I yielded to a sudden terror and fled from that seemingly accursed spot and sought my chamber.

The sun was high in the heavens, when it awoke me from my fitful slumbers. My first thoughts were on the incidents of the previous night. Immediately an intense desire possessed me to view the spot and the possible effect, that such an unearthly scene as I had there witnessed might now reveal. As soon as possible, for I was still quite stiff and cramped from my exposure of the night before, I hastened to the lawn. There unscathed as it seemed, stood the massive protruding trunk of buried oak, defiant and grim, and as firmly imbedded in the soil as ever.

I could scarcely believe my eyes. I looked again to make sure that I saw aright. As I did so, I stepped to the side directly facing my position at the open window the previous night. Then I beheld that

which caused my heart seemingly to stand still, and a cold, creeping, icy sensation to possess my being. My eyes, however, remained immovably fixed. For there, burned as if by pyrography on the barkless surface of the oak, I saw a long, bony, slender, sinewy arm and hand. Its index finger, sternly pointing in rigid directness down its slanting trunk, as if in guidance, and impatient at delay. From shoulder to tip of finger, it was some three feet in length, and the color of a manikin. Could ever anything more weird, unearthly, or uncanny be conceived? I gazed as in a dream. At last my powers of volition returned, and I advanced, the better to examine this most startling, phenomenal imprint. The lightning's stroke had centered the almost perpendicular upturned trunk, and thence down through its hollow depths had made its way, leaving but that one, gaunt and ominous token of its external contact.

I had often thought of having the buried oak, with its mass of earth and mould and clinging vine, removed. For many storms of late had seemed to have centered above its bed and menaced all surrounding objects. It was, however, not unsightly, and as the undertaking was no small one, the labor had been deferred. I immediately, however, set to work, and had this fire-stricken hand and arm removed in my presence and with the greatest care. I also gave orders, as soon as more urgent duties permitted, to clear away the debris to the bottom of the tree, and remove that also. Then, with my ghastly curiosity preserved in the form of a long and narrow panel, I returned to the house. I went straight to my aunt's chamber, remembering that as yet the window, which the night before I had left open, had not been closed. I entered, closed the window, and then, noticing the silhouette that was lying face downward on the floor, I stooped, restored the broken cord and replaced it as before upon the wall. In so doing, I noticed a peculiar glint that on close inspection, proved to emanate from a crack within the glass at its upper right hand corner. It had not been there previous to the night before, I was certain.

As I turned the picture, in order more fully to examine the extent of this injury, an involuntary cry escaped me. At a certain angle, the light revealed in the glass an enormous flaw, an almost exact reproduction of the scene I had witnessed the previous night. There was the illumined cloud, with the lightning's long, sinewy arm and hand unfolding to the uplifted axe. Its blade was raised as in wrathful and covetous might, and poised for quick descent; not, however, above the buried oak, but at the back and directly over the silhouette's head. In all else, it was a most startling reproduction. The hand and arm also bore a marked resemblance to the one

upon the oak panel. I examined the picture again, and again; only at a certain angle did this wonderful light effect from the otherwise almost imperceptible crack become visible.

I turned from the picture with its Sphinx-like riddle. What did it mean? I was haunted by strangs misgivings, and vague fantasies. Try as I might, a grave apprehension, as of some approaching danger, oppressed me, and I could not shake it off. An indescribable feeling possessed me that I alone was chosen as the confident of unseen agents who mightily strove, deprived of speech, to impel me then and there to perform some sacred duty, that was yet undone.

Days grew into weeks, the weeks into months; and again the anniversary of "Ridge Wood Mystery" and the birth of the pyrographic hand found me seated before that grewsome relic, and the silhouette. The buried oak yet remained undisturbed in its appealing grandeur. Work had been most urgent in other directions, and the labor of removing it and grading to the lofty bank above had yet remained undone. It was now twilight and rapidly becoming dark. Through the smoke of my cigar I listlessly watched through the open window the steadily appearing stars as, one by one, they took their places in the celestial vault. Then I gazed dreamily about the room. Leaning against the corner of the wall under the silhouette, which hung motionless and placid as ever, rested the panel with its pyrographic hand and arm. Circumstances had so intertwined it with this room, and its appointments, that the corner had been its resting place, since its creation one year ago that night. I had pointed it upwards, however, for in pointing downward it had appeared too awfully suggestive in its tragically tense and bony directness. So pointing aloft toward the window doors, as though in mute witness of its ethereal birth, it had, since that time, reclined beneath the confirming beauty of the silhouette. I sat there hour after hour, a prey to melancholy reflection. At length I fell asleep. When I awoke the east was turning gray, but the stars had lost none of their twinkling splendor. I was chilled and benumbed, from my long exposure to the night air, and my cramped position. In that half conscious state, however, that always precedes the full awakening of one's faculties, I lingered. Not a breath of air was stirring.

Whether it was half a dream or not, I may never know; but of a sudden, the broken glass above the silhouette's head appeared to gleam with a never before seen brightness, although enveloped in deepest shadow. Once, twice, thrice, it flashed, as if in caressing brightness; then the face of the silhouette shone with a pale, passionate, phosphorescent glow. Once, twice, thrice, the picture tapped the wall; then it began to sway as though endeavoring to reach the

pyrographic panel. My eyes involuntarily followed its direction. Great God! The panel with its long and ghastly arm and hand, were responding to the summons. The hand and arm shone blood-red in the uncertain light. Slowly, the panel swung on its lower corner from out the wall, upheld by some unseen power. Noiselessly and glideningly it gradually approached the open window, its hand curved like the rampant head of a brazen serpent; and quivering, as does the electric needle when it greets the pole.

I strove to wake. Was I not in the grasp of a horrid nightmare? I essayed to call aloud, and break the magic spell; it was in vain. I was incapable of movement. I could but think and see. I was as one in a trance, save for my brain and eyes. My eyes followed the every movement and direction of that hideous spectral hand, as though governed by magnetic flow. Its long, bony index-finger now pierced the open window. There it swung thrice, then it poised itself and remained fixed upon a glittering star. Brighter and brighter grew that star. It appeared surrounded by a misty halo of light. Now it seemed to breathe forth fire. Nearer, more radiant and dazzling, it became in its ethereal glory. It threw out snaky locks of flame, like an aerial Medusa; a veritable Chimera spouting forth liquid fire. Now it filled the perspective with its unearthly splendor, and its nucleus like an enormous radium eye, barred my window with its lashes of flame. It glared upon me, this solar spectrum, and it rolled in endless kaleidoscopic colors.

The heat was stifling. I gasped for breath. There was a roaring as of a thousand furnaces, accompanied with a dazzling whiteness; then came a splintering, deafening crash, a lurid burst of bluish light that swept away all shadows, and the meteor struck the buried oak, and sank in blackness, sank where the ancient oak had disappeared forever. In its place the mouth of an enormous yawning pit, belched forth a cloud of silvery smoke and ashes. They covered lawn and house, and filled my chamber to suffocation. Involuntarily I sprang to my feet; the magic spell that had held me as in a trance was broken. Clutching convulsively at my throat, I rushed madly through the open window. I staggered across the veranda, striking wildly at the air. It seemed peopled with countless grinning faces that I would fain assail, but ever illusive they mockingly escaped my frantic blows. Round and round, midst a revolving cone of gleaming, fiery eyes, I now battled. Their swirl was ever upwards. The ground was billowing beneath my stumbling form, a yawning chasm whirled at my very feet. I paused, my eyes grew dim, I reeled, grasped wildly at the air, and with one last despairing cry fell, prostrated on the lawn.

The occupants, not only of my house, but of the adjoining farm houses, were by this time thoroughly aroused and alarmed. They came hastening to the scene. I was quickly restored to consciousness, and with the assembled throng, soon found myself gazing down into the pit that marked the meteor's course, and the site where once had stood the buried oak. The smell of burnt wood pervaded everything, and puffs of thin, white smoke yet rose from out its blackened depth, and clung lazily above the heated ground. A voice from amongst the crowd cried out, "Mr. Sternhold! heaven has sent you a fortune. That meteor is worth five dollars a pound, and the soft dry ground and burning wood has without doubt prevented it from bursting, by being cooled too quickly; so it must be of enormous size and value." "Let's dig it out!" came from a dozen voices almost simultaneously. "If it weighs an ounce, it will weigh over half a ton!" spoke up the excited voice of the village coroner, who was a man well posted in scientific facts.

Shovels were quickly brought, and under many eager hands, the large mound rapidly began to disappear. Suddenly, with a cry of horror, a workman dropped his shovel, and speechless stood pointing to what at first appeared to be a roll of cloth, clinging to a fragment of splintered wood. We all gathered round. There, protruding from the ground, was a human arm grasping a rusty woodman's axe. "Men (it was the coroner again who spoke), take away that dirt most carefully." The body was found to be lying on its left side, face downward. As the ground fell away, the body sank back, revealing its full features, which were quite well preserved. A silence fell upon us all. Then a dozen voices hoarsely whispered, "Julius Craven!" Carefully the corpse was removed and laid upon the lawn. Then the coroner's voice again broke the silence. "We must investigate still further, men; I will assume direction; continue with the removal of that mound and use all care."

Scarcely a score more of shovelfulls had been cast aside, when again a workman stopped and pointed tremblingly. As before a mass of cloth was seen protruding from the ground. Carefully, even tenderly, we removed the clinging marl. It was the body of a woman, lying face downward; her arms encircling, and her hands convulsively clutching an iron bound box.

Reverently we removed her clinging grasp, the coroner noting as before the minutest detail. Not one among us but knew too well the identity of that corpse, long before its features were revealed; and as we gently bore her to the sheltering canvas that veiled the other form, we were not shocked, for the features of Jezabel Sternhold, though dark as a silhouette's, were yet fair to look upon. The chest

was partly open and it contained the gold and jewels that had been her fortune. Despite these most gruesome discoveries, and their diversion from our former quest, we decided to resume our previous task, and unearth our guiding star that fragment of chaotic worlds, whose earth-bound course had proved a revelation from the vast unknown. Nor had we far or long to seek.

Reposing in darkness, caused by its own volcanic heat, apart from any clinging debris, the meteor rested in inert majesty, rested upon a few charred roots, all that remained of the once mighty oak. As the walls of its self-made cavern baked to a brick like clay crumbled and fell in powder-like dust at its base, a dozed shovels dropped from twice as many nerveless hands. And there, silent and motionless as the dead, we stood in reverential pause. The climax had come, we were all thrilled, startled and yet hushed. Not a rough and sightless mass of chaotic matter, burst upon our eager vision, but an enormous, intertwining, labyrinth of metallic iron shot its bright and life-like substance into being. Slowly, its every detail burned insidiously its way into our powers of understanding.

We gazed in reverential amazement, and silent awe, upon a group of figures that would have honored the chisels of a Praxitiles, or an Angelo. A human group so wild and rugged in its awful grandeur, that it became more than life-like; it was supernatural. There stood a man clutching an axe, which was uplifted above a female form that grasped an iron box. Both stood beneath a mighty oak, above which a thunder bolt in bold relief was being hurled upon the uplifted axe. It was an elegy in moulded metal, this "Metoric Laocoön".

All saw a mystery revealed as by a miracle. The woman had stolen noiselessly from her chamber, crossed the veranda, and ascended the bank by means of the old time path. Stealthly a masculine form glides in pursuit, as pitiless as the storm. It keeps in the deepest shadows, from whence the covetous gleam of a woodman's axe, flashes without bidding. The woman darts beneath the branches, and approaches the trunk of the hollow oak. A storm cloud hangs threateningly over all. The woman stoops, and takes from a concealed cavity in the oak's trunk a treasure box. The man rushes forward and swings aloft his glittering axe. The woman raises her face, and gives that wild shriek which I had heard that never to be forgotten night, before the lightning burned its pyrographic arm. The woman's cry is an appeal for aid, and it is recorded; the spirit of the storm cloud harkens to her wail. As the bright and murderous steel pauses for its descent, as though in defiant invitation, the avenging thunderbolt is launched as upon an Ajax. It strikes the

descending blade, and invests with its deathly current both axe and man, treasure and victim. The would-be murderer and his supplicant are each a corpse. They had been inseparable through life, both in vice and crime; they met one and the same death; and were destined for a common burial. For beneath the awful impact of that bolt, the old oak totters on its crumbling bank; the bank gives way, and with a roar, that was only drowned by the awful rending of that reverberating shock, the scene sank and was buried beneath an avalanch of soil.

Not a clue, not a trace, remained of that awful tragedy, that God alone had witnessed. The rain descended and made firm the earth, and removed all marks of recent burial. When search was made, the appearance of the scene was as though it had been thus for years.

* * * * * * * *

I have told you the story of my life's conversion, the unraveling of "Ridge Wood Mystery" by the "Meteoric Laocoön". No more of interest remains for me to tell; I have finished my task, and it is well. My chamber is enveloped in gloom, for the embers on its hearth stone are fast becoming cold. The meteor's form is hardly discernible in its corner; the silhouette has faded on its wall, and the pyrographic hand and arm are scarcely visible beneath the woodman's axe. Each has fulfilled its earthly mission between the two eternities, and their forms to me seem sacred. Ever will they remain my conpanions; our work is done; we rest from our labors.

THE END.

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